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ABSTRACT

The Post-Secondary Enrollment Options Act, enacted by the Minnesota State Legislature in 1985, allows 11th- and 12th-grade high school students to take courses, for credit, in colleges, junior colleges, and vocational-technical institutes despite opposition from high school authorities. Students may use credits from these courses to count toward both high school and postsecondary graduation, and state funds are apportioned according to the percentage of credit hours the student takes at each level. The primary opposition to this plan comes from the public school sector, which charges that the plan will erode state support, reduce enrollment (thereby eliminating special course offerings), and result in a loss of qualified teachers. Teacher organizations claim that the law contributes to elitism among students and that it injures them by subjecting them to "unlicensed" instructors. The Minnesota Federation of Teachers has brought a suit challenging the constitutionality of the law because it allows state aid to church-related schools. Despite opposition, the plan is supported enthusiastically by the governor and both parties in the legislature. Polls confirm its popularity with the public, and participating students are supportive. The plan will radically alter education in Minnesota, and other states are looking on it with interest as they explore various means to provide higher academic standards. (Author/TE)

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A Plan for Academic Excellence: Competition Between Secondary and Post-Secondary Institutions

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One of the most distinctive outcomes of the current reform movement in American education emerged in Minnesota in 1985 with the enactment of a law requiring public high schools in the state to allow any 11th and 12th grade students to take classes for credit in post-secondary institutions in the state. This report describes in detail the impact of the law during its first year. Information comes from the author's own interviews and document analysis and from data gathered by the Minnesota Department of Education.

In 1985 the government of Minnesota took many steps to reform education. In large measure the reform legislation followed the "Minnesota Plan," proposed by BW Associates of Berkeley, California. [1] Major responsibility for this firm's involvement rested with the Minnesota Business Partnership, an organization of business leaders who expressed concern over a perceived loss of quality in education in the state. Although the nonpartisan Partnership contracted the firm, the Democratic administration endorsed the report enthusiastically. Laws resulting from the plan required the development of verbal and non-verbal tests for students seeking admission to teacher training; the development of subject area tests to assess the skills of beginning teachers before certification; the development of alternative teacher education programs for people with non-education degrees; the initiation of studies on the effectiveness of teacher

education programs in the state; and the planning of a residential arts center for talented students.

Although all these mandates elicited strong reaction, by far the most dramatic legislation was the Post-Secondary Enrollment Options Act. [2] Under the law, high school students may pursue studies at private or public colleges, universities, or vocational-technical schools. The 1985 law included only those two-year colleges (called "community colleges") that were public, but a 1986 revision added private junior colleges as well. The law had two specific official purposes: to promote "rigorous educational pursuits," and to provide a "wider range of options for students." [3] According to a State Department of Education spokesperson, the law also intended to create "an element of competition between high schools and colleges that should give incentives to high schools to improve." [4]

Under the original legislation students could opt to receive credit toward both high school and post-secondary institution graduation at the same time. In 1986, the legislature altered the rule by requiring students to choose credits for graduation from one level of institution only. [4] A response to the bitter attacks on the plan by public school people, the modification appears to be essentially cosmetic. Students who do choose post-secondary credit must also receive secondary credit from their school district if they request it after completion of the course or courses. Students who immediately opt for secondary

credit--the vast majority--must receive post-secondary credit upon request from the institution that provided the course. As with normal post-secondary credit, other institutions of higher education could--and in fact almost always do--award post-secondary credit also. High school students who take all their junior and senior class work at post-secondary institutions may secure enough credits to have completed two years toward a bachelor's degree, or to have completed outright an associate degree, upon graduating from high school.

Institutions that admit high school juniors and seniors include the University of Minnesota and its branch campuses; the seven institutions of the state university system; public and (since 1986) private junior colleges; vocational-technical institutes; and private four-year liberal arts degree-granting colleges and universities. Although the law requires programs to be nonsectarian, the private institutions may be church-affiliated. The institutions cannot impose any scholarship requirements--such as those involving grade averages or class standings--that they do not impose on regularly matriculating students. During the fall 1985 semester some institutions did attempt to impose specific requirements, but they dropped them when the State Department of Education informed them that such requirements violated the law.

The state pays the post-secondary institution for each student's tuition, text books, materials, and

program-related costs up to the amount of the state foundation aid per pupil unit--now approximately $3000. The state subtracts the amount it pays from the aid that would have gone to the district for the particular student. Aid is pro-rated for part-time students. If the amount of aid is greater than the amount of aid due the district, the "excess reduction shall be made from other state aids due the district." Students who have enrolled for post-secondary credit only do not receive any state aid. Thus few students elect that option, especially since, as noted previously, the secondary credit option can provide essentially the same benefits. If parents have financial need, the state will reimburse school districts for transportation of students between the high school and the post-secondary institution in which they are enrolled.

According to a Minnesota Department of Education survey of students who participated in the program during the first semester of its operation, [5] 1.5 percent of all 11th and 12th grade students in the state, more than 1,600, representing 226 high schools, took post-secondary courses. A prime determinant of attendance appeared to be an institution's proximity to a high school. Of the students attending, twelfth graders comprised 74 percent and eleventh graders 26 percent. A third of the students in each group attended the post-secondary institution full-time. Sixty-one percent of the students were female and 39 percent male.

The largest segment of students, 47 percent, attended community colleges. Twenty-three percent enrolled in colleges in the state university system, and 15 percent attended campuses of the University of Minnesota. The remainder went to private or vocational schools. Scheduling difficulties, not lack of desire, curtailed attendance at the latter. Fifty-four percent of students took courses in the communications area (including English and speech), 37 percent in social sciences (such as political science, sociology, and economics), 19 percent in mathematics, 18 percent in "social studies" (interdisciplinary areas), and 14 percent in "business." Courses taken by the fewest students were music, 4 percent; health, 2 percent; and home economics, .5 percent.

Students find the program valuable. Certainly, some students have had problems, and complaints have surfaced over the timing of courses (sometimes they overlap high school courses and sometimes they have shorter duration, thus creating problems of credit determination); transportation; and lack of adequate counseling by the high school (especially with respect to high school graduation requirements in relation to post-secondary courses, an issue over which two students have sued a district [6]). But praise overwhelms complaints. Ninety six percent of the students responding to the State Department of Education survey reported satisfaction with the program, 82 percent intended to take additional courses, and 77 percent believed

that the courses challenged them more than did high school courses. Grade reports from institutions revealed that high school students performed better than regular post-secondary students, undoubtedly reflecting the type of students who chose to use the plan. Forty-seven percent of community college students, 75 percent of private college students, 63 percent of state university students, and 60 percent of university of Minnesota students received A's or B's. [7]

Administrators of institutions of higher education appear to be satisfied with the plan, although, realizing the dangers of serious conflict with representatives of the public school sector, they have not attempted to recruit students. Some higher education institutions have established regional classes in high school buildings when districts have indicated a willingness to cooperate, in order to accommodate 11th and 12th grade students--and others--in sparsely populated areas. Although the bargaining agents for faculty members of the state university system, the community college system, and many of the vocational-technical institutes are affiliates of the Minnesota Education Association, the plan's most bitter opponent, the higher education faculty members have in general expressed satisfaction with the plan. The bargaining agent for the state university system, the Inter-Faculty Organization, supported only minor changes ("fine tuning") in the law during the 1986 legislative session. [8]

Representatives of the public school sector--the school board association, most of the administrator organizations, and the teacher organizations, especially the Minnesota Education Assocation--constitute the chief opposition to the plan. The criticisms by the school board association and by the administrator organizations (except the secondary principals association, which supported the plan with considerable internal dissension) have been similar. [9] The cutting of district funds is a major issue. Both the state school board association and administrative organizations charge that the plan curtails or eliminates programs. Ultimately, teachers must be released, but because Minnesota law prohibits districts from placing teachers on unrequested leave after June 1, any loss of funds may be reflected immediately by cuts in activities having no direct connection with the post-secondary plan. The plan, administrators and board members charge, creates such unpredictability in enrollment that administrative planning becomes a nightmare. Especially troublesome, some administrators assert, are problems in scheduling and the provision of adequate counseling.

Administrators' and board representatives' complaints extend well beyond basic financial and management issues. The consequences of the plan to students has received much criticism: Students could lose contact with their schools and with their peer groups, thus sacrificing the social experiences that contribute to their personal

growth. Some critics of the plan also have accused institutions of higher education of duplicating high school courses, although concrete evidence has not yet been adduced. Somewhat paradoxically in view of the tenor of criticisms of the plan, some board spokespeople and administrators in rural areas have accused the state of geographic discrimination because of the difficulties inherent in rural students' attendance at post-secondary institutions.

Not surprisingly, the State Department of Education received innumerable questions and complaints during the plan's implementation. The person in charge of implementation reported receiving from twenty to thirty calls a day from administrators and board members during the first six months of its operation. [10]

Even more bitter opposition to the plan has come from the Minnesota Education Association. After the plan had been operative for only two months, the Association president called it a "failure." [11] Spokespeople for the Association endorsed most of the charges of administrators and board members, adding that the plan would "wither" the high school curriculum, dilute college courses--the Association's "Mickey Mouse" course charge [12] has been belied by the State Department survey--and injure students who had to study under "unlicensed" teachers. Underlying the Associastion's attacks has been the spectre of teacher lay-offs.

The Minnesota Federation of Teachers, a smaller organization in the state, has concerned itself mainly with the financial impact on school districts, [13] but it also has been concerned with public aid flowing to parochial schools. It has filed suit in federal court, with support of other eductional organizations in the state, challenging the constitutionality of the law because it permits the granting of state aid directly to religious institutions. [14]

The opposition of the public school sector to the plan has so far had little impact, and no major changes were made in the law in 1986. (In early 1987, however, the legislature will receive from the Department of Education an extensive evaluation of the implementation of the law.) The legislature defeated two of the major assaults on the plan: Attempts to require students to pay for all courses that would be counted at any time for college credit, and to prohibit students from taking courses if they "duplicated" those of the district, with definition of duplication resting largely on district interpretation. The state commissioner of education has praised the program for making both schools and colleges "more flexible." [15] The governor told public school organization representatives that he remained firmly committed to the option. [16] Independently sponsored polls have indicated growing citizen support. [17] Attacks on the plan have drawn sharp responses. One of the leading newspapers in the state, the

St. Paul Pioneer Press Dispatch, has castigated the public school groups that called for changes restricting institutions of higher education in offering courses. [18] It also has editorialized about the "bunker mentality" of the Minnesota Education Association, asking whether the Association was "more interested in protecting teachers' jobs than in exploring new pathways to educational excellence." [19]

If the plan appears to be successful in meeting the needs of students, its impact undoubtedly will extend far beyond the borders of Minnesota. Consequently it deserves close attention everywhere. Certainly, the financial impact on public school districts would call for a more stabilized form of financial aid for districts than now exists through most of the United States; more state level control would appear to be inevitable. The impact on teacher training, already under careful scrutiny in many states, may also be great. If students find non-certified college instructors to be more challenging than public school teachers, the need for the methodology component of secondary teacher training may be brought into serious question.

A major issue with respect to the implications of the plan is the place of the public high school in the American educational system. Should the high school become a place only for students who do not have easy access to institutions of higher education or who do not have strong

academic or vocational interests or who find extracurricular activities very attractive? Or is there any need for the 11th and 12th grades in high schools? Is peer association really important for high school students? What about extracurricular activities, so important an aspect of the high school experience? Could they exist in high schools with reduced student bodies, or should they be reserved in modified form for colleges? Or might communities themselves take over the responsibilities, as they do in many other countries, for competitive adolescent sports and other activities?

Finally, what about the impact of early college graduation upon the economy? With a shortage of younger people, would early graduation from institutions of higher education lead to a more productive economy? Or would it lead to a larger segment of the unemployed? Certainly, other questions will emerge from the plan if it were to become widespread, and attention should be given to them.

Notes

1. BW Associates Inc. The Minnesota Plan: Volume 1 - Overview and Volume 2 - Implementation (Berkeley: BW Associates, Inc., R-106, November 1984). See Paul Berman, "The Next Step: The Minnesota Plan," Phi Delta Kappan 67 (November 1985): 188-193.

2. Minnesota, Statutes (1985), section 123.3514.

3. Minnesota Department of Education, Guidelines for the Implementation of the Post-Secondary Enrollment Options Act for the 11th and 12th Grade Students (St. Paul, Minnesota: The Department, 1985), p. 1.

4. Minnesota, Statutes (1986), section 123.3514. Hereafter, unless otherwise noted, reference is made to the statute as amended in 1986.

5. Minnesota Department of Education, "Report," released February 14, 1986. Presented by Jessie Montano, of the Department, at meeting of Midwest Council for Educational Administration, Winona, Minnesota, 11 April 1986. See also "High School Students Taking College Courses Doing Well," Update (Minnesota Department of Education), March 1986, p.5, and reports in various state newspapers, 15 February 1986.

6. "Two Youths Sue Faribault School," Winona Daily News, 5 July 1986, p.5.

7. Minnesota Department of Education, "Report."

8. Russ Stanton, Interim Director, Governmental Relations Committee, IFO, Memo to IFO Board of Directors and Governmental Relations Committee, 21 March 1986.

9. The issue of unpredictability was emphasized before the plan went into operation. See Mary Jane Smetanka, "State to Pay College Tuition for High School Students," Minneapolis Star and Tribune, 18 August 1985, p. 1.

10. Jessie Montano, Winona, 11 April 1986.

11. Marti Zins, "Business Partnership Unveils Its Plan for Educational Disaster," MEA Advocate, 15 November 1985, p. 1. See also "Survey Shows Open Enrollment Denies Students Equal Access to Program,: MEA Advocate, 15 November 1985, pp. 1 and 7. Throughout the academic year the theme of attacks never changed.

12. Mary Jane Smetanka, "Randall Defends College Course Program," Minneapolis Star & Tribune, 8 October 1985, p. 31.

13. Minnesota Federation of Teachers, Sample Resolutions, 1986.

14. "Suit Challenges State Tuition Payments," St. Paul Pioneer Press Dispatch, 24 January 1986, p. 10A.

15. Ruth Randall, "Choice: Restructures Schools," Update (Minnesota Department of Education), 26 March 1986, p. 5.

16. Bill Salisbury, "Open Enrollment Still Perpich Aim," St. Paul Pioneer Press Dispatch, 21 May 1986, p. 5D.

17. "Good News on Choice," St. Paul Pioneer Press Dispatch, 24 January 1986, p. 10A.

18. "Don't Let Naysayers Nip Program in Bud," editorial, St. Paul Pioneer Press Dispatch, 10 March 1986, p. 6A.

19. "Leave Bunker, MEA, Try Some Trail-Blazing," editorial, St. Paul Pioneer Press Dispatch, 18 September 1985, p. 14A.